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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON CAUCASUS MUSLIM
BOARD CHAIRMAN SHEIKH PASHAZADE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D)

11. (C) In a July 21 introductory call on the Chairman of the Caucasus Muslim Board Sheikh Pashazade, the Ambassador discussed the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Azerbaijan. She highlighted Azerbaijan's leading role in promoting religious tolerance and asked how the U.S. could best reach out to the country's Muslim population. The Sheikh outlined the country's success in developing religious tolerance, and said that Azerbaijanis are worshipping more not because their beliefs have changed but because they no longer feel afraid to do so. He asserted that Russia has a more balanced policy toward the Near East than the U.S., and is succeeding in getting its message through to the Muslim world in a way the U.S. is not. The Sheikh expressed strong concern about U.S. policy in Iraq, which he said threatens to create another Hezbollah-type group in Iraq. He called on the international community to resolve the current Israeli-Lebanese conflict. The Sheikh spoke highly of the recent interfaith World Summit of Religious Leaders in Moscow, and said he hoped the summit would be the basis for a potential United Nations religious organization. He also pointed out that Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement at the summit had resonated with attendees. END SUMMARY

12. (C) During her July 21 introductory call on the Chairman of the Caucasus Muslim Board Sheikh Pashazade, the Ambassador reviewed U.S. priorities for the bilateral relationship: cooperation in the Global War on Terror and regional and global security and stability, global energy security, and advancing democracy through political and economic reform. She highlighted the important role played by the Sheikh in promoting religious tolerance and said that Azerbaijan has a strong history and great potential as a leader in religious tolerance in the region and in the world. The Ambassador also spoke of her experience in Iraq, and asked how the U.S. could best reach out to Azerbaijan's Muslim population.

HEYDAR'S LEGACY

13. (C) The Sheikh explained how far Azerbaijan had come in developing religious tolerance. He said that during the Soviet era, people did not feel that they could worship freely. He continued that by making an effort to visit mosques, churches, and synagogues former President Heydar Aliyev laid a good foundation of social tolerance. Azerbaijan's success with religious tolerance, according to the Sheikh, stems from current President Ilham Aliyev's decision to follow in his father's footsteps. Today people are not worshipping more because they have changed their beliefs, the Sheikh explained, but rather because they are no longer afraid to do so.

RUSSIA VS. THE U.S.

14. (C) Comparing Russian and U.S. influence with the Muslim world, the Sheikh said that Russia has recently been more successful in getting its message out to the Muslim population and implementing its policies in the region than the U.S. He argued that because of its historical experience and location, Russian policy toward both Azerbaijan and the Near East is more balanced than that of the U.S. The Sheikh said bluntly that at the World Summit of Religious leaders, Putin "knew what to say." He also said that Russia does a better job than the U.S. of supporting regional religious leaders. Pointing out the importance of respecting a country's traditions and norms, the Sheikh said that President Bush should use religious advisors.

IRAQ

15. (C) According to the Sheikh, the most significant mistake the U.S. has made in Iraq was viewing the population as more divided by religion and ethnicity than it actually was. He warned that a Hezbollah-type group could develop in Iraq. He said that because democracy is not "in Iraqis' blood," any form of democracy that is established would not last more than twenty years, and might disappear in only a few days. He explained that he knows many Iraqi religious leaders, and pointed out that there is a deep relationship between Azerbaijan and Iraq because many significant Shiite holy sites are located in Iraq. The Ambassador disagreed, sharing her experience in Iraq. The Sheikh countered that although people may have been outwardly weeping with joy, they only voted because they were instructed to do so by religious leaders, and that they "were not happy in their hearts." The

BAKU 00001117 002 OF 002

Sheikh also said that Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, while recently in Azerbaijan, had asked him to write a statement that the Iraqi government could use with both the Sunni and Shiite populations to promote reconciliation.

THE ISRAELI-LEBANESE CONFLICT

16. (C) The Sheikh touched upon the current conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying that the international community should intervene to stop both sides from killing each other. In his opinion, many Arab countries disagree with Iran's stance on this issue, but remain silent. He warned that politicians should pay attention to the shifting power blocs, as religion becomes a greater factor in the international structure, and said that the Organization of Islamic Countries could become a more powerful bloc.

WORLD SUMMIT OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

17. (C) The Sheikh spoke highly of the July 3-5 World Summit of Religious Leaders in Moscow, where he said representatives from different faiths shared their perspectives on globalization. He said that this summit could serve as a model for a potential religious organization under the auspices of the United Nations. The Sheikh envisioned a body that would serve as a watchdog organization for religious decisions made by heads of state. He added that such a body would have credibility because people generally trust religious leaders more than they trust government officials. The Sheikh also emphasized that Russian President Putin's message at the summit had resonated with Muslims in a way that the U.S. message has not.

THE SHEIKH ASSERTS HIS AUTHORITY

18. (C) In response to the Sheikh's comments about U.S. policy

in the Near East, the Ambassador asked the Sheikh to share his opinion of what specifically he believes the USG is doing wrong. The Sheikh declined to answer, commenting that because this is a long and difficult topic, he would have to "think about it" and promised to discuss it with the Ambassador at a later meeting. In response to her question of how the U.S. could best reach out to Azerbaijan's Muslim population, the Sheikh obfuscated. He cautioned the Ambassador to go through him in any interaction with Azerbaijan's religious community, saying that if she were to show up unofficially at a mosque, people might think that the government - without specifying which government - is trying to interfere with religion. The Sheikh offered to arrange meetings for the Ambassador with religious leaders both in Baku and in the regions.

COMMENT

19. (C) Although the meeting was friendly, Pashazade was clearly posturing for the cameras that were present throughout. While highlighting openness toward the Ambassador's dialogue, Pashazade used the meeting to deliver an unusually critical comment on U.S. policy and seemed eager to underscore his singular authority towards the Muslim world in Azerbaijan's religious affairs.

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